



Rose Kushner

(1929-1990)

***Journalist , author, breast cancer expert, and patient advocate.
Pioneered wide-spread use of breast self-examinations***

Rose Kushner was born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1929. After graduating from high school, she attended Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore Junior College, and Montgomery College, where she took pre-med courses thinking that she wanted to be a physician. However, she changed her major concentration to journalism, receiving her A.B. summa cum laude from the University of Maryland in 1972. As a journalist, she freelanced in Bolivia and covered the Vietnam War in 1967 for the Baltimore Sun, Washington Magazine, and Montgomery County Sentinel. She also covered the Yom Kippur war in 1973. In addition, Kushner did some medical writing, and even wrote an unpublished book, "The Peacehawks."

The discovery of a breast lump changed her life, and the lives of everyone around her forever. In 1974, when it was revealed that her lump was cancerous, she started a journey for which she would be nationally recognized. It was also a journey that opened new doors for many women with breast cancer. Realizing that there was not much information available about her condition, she researched the topic in medical and technical publications, keeping notes as she underwent lumpectomy and reconstructive surgery. An article based on her own experiences appeared in The Washington Post and was syndicated in hundreds of newspapers.

Rose Kushner used her talents as a psychologist, teacher, investigative reporter, and medical writer to work tirelessly as an advocate for breast cancer patients. A report from the National Cancer Institute (NCI) estimates that about one in eight women in the United States (approximately 12.6 percent) will develop breast cancer during her lifetime. It is estimated that one woman will die of breast cancer every 13 minutes. Kushner became the voice for many women as well as the leading lay expert on breast cancer. She was responsible for affecting changes in laws and medical practices and giving alternatives to patients. Despite her own battle with breast cancer, her efforts were indefatigable.

Kushner is credited as the single most important person to influence the elimination of the "one step" radical mastectomy as the only treatment choice for breast cancer. In the 1970s, if a woman was diagnosed with breast cancer, she would be anesthetized and the lump removed for biopsy; if it was malignant, the breast would be removed without previous approval from the patient. Only upon awakening from the anesthesia would the patient learn that she had lost a breast. The now routine "two-step" procedure, whereby a woman is told the results of her biopsy before any decisions regarding further treatment or surgery are made, was the result of Kushner's work.

One year after her diagnosis, in 1975, Kushner founded the Breast Cancer Advisory Center to provide

information and support for breast cancer patients. She was frequently called before Congress to testify on health and cancer topics. In June 1977, she was the only non-physician chosen to be on an NIH panel, which adopted the two-stage procedure instead of the Halsted radical mastectomy as the standard treatment for women suspected of having breast cancer. As a result, a biopsy that located a breast lump was no longer automatically followed by a mastectomy. Her recognition as an expert on the issue of breast cancer continued to grow. President Carter appointed Kushner to the National Cancer Advisory Board (1980-86), where she brought to medical policy-making and task forces her skills as an investigative reporter and patient advocate. She was one of the founders of the National Alliance of Breast Cancer Organizations and served on its board from 1986 to 1989. This umbrella organization linked many local groups, published a newsletter, and lobbied for policy reform. Kushner organized BreastPac, a political action advocacy, lobbying and fund-raising organization. She was also a member of the Montgomery County Commission on Health. In 1980, she was appointed to the American Cancer Society Breast Cancer Task Force.

Kushner authored seven books about breast cancer, among them *Breast Cancer: A Personal History and Investigative Report* (1975), *Why Me? What Every Woman Should Know About Breast Cancer to Save Her Life* (1977) and *Alternatives: New Developments in the War on Breast Cancer* (1984). She received awards from the American Medical Writers Association (1980, 1985) for her books and numerous articles about breast cancer. She also received numerous awards for her endless and indefatigable crusade against breast cancer. She was awarded the Medal of Honor in 1987 and the Courage Award in 1988 by the American Cancer Society. In 1990, she was awarded the Society of Surgical Oncology's James Ewing Layman's Award for outstanding contributions by a lay person to the fight against cancer. In 1992, she was inducted into the Maryland's Women's Hall of Fame.

Her work advocating for women with breast cancer continued all the years that she lived with the disease, using her personal experience as a tool for public change. Kushner maintained a cancer hot line out of her home to comfort other individuals in similar situations. She was known in the medical community for her determination to urge physicians to advance the treatment of breast cancer, a disease she believed had been ignored. She strongly recommended the need for self-examination as a means of prevention. She continued battling insurance companies to require that they provide coverage for mammograms. Her persistence paid off. Kushner influenced the introduction of a successful Congressional bill authorizing medicare coverage for screening mammograms. Although repealed in November 1989, the law was reinstated in January 1991. However, Kushner was not able to see the results of her efforts. She died at age 60 on January 7, 1990 of breast cancer, surviving more than 15 years. She was married in 1951 and had three children. She lived in Montgomery County from 1955 until her death in 1990.

SOURCES:

- The Montgomery County Historical Society Library
- <http://oasis.harvard.edu/html/sch00028.html>
- www.mdarchives.state.md.us/msa/educ/exhibits/womenshall/html/whflist.html